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ABSTRACT

Laurence Yep's "Dragonwings" won the Newbery Award in 1976. It is the story of a young boy named Moon Shadow and his physical and emotional journeys between Chinese and American cultures. Through Moon Shadow's experiences upon entering the United States as an immigrant, the reader empathizes with him on 3 levels: the perception of Americans from a child's point of view; the common experience of confronting new situations; and Americans' common history of immigration. Yep maintains a balance with Moon Shadow's experiences in both cultures. Miss Whitlaw teaches Moon Shadow some English and encourages him to write short paragraphs about dragons; he becomes a proficient enough writer to establish a correspondence with the Wright Brothers for his father, an expert kite maker. Laurence Yep writes that "Dragonwings" is a "historical fantasy" inspired by both his father's journey to America and the newspaper account of a young Chinese flier who flew for 20 minutes in the hills of Oakland, California in 1909. In researching "Dragonwings" Yep was unable to discover much about the human experience of Chinese immigrants to America at the turn of the century. His own experience was with a family that did not speak Chinese--when he attended a Chinese school, he was placed in the "dummies" class. Beyond Yep's relevance to a Chinese-American audience, his work reflects a common humanity to readers coming of age or not, bicultural or not, attempting to find themselves in the pieces of their particular puzzles. (Contains 19 references.) (NKA)

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Working In and Between Two Cultures: Moon Shadow's Dilemma in Laurence Yep's Dragonwings

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Working in and Between Two Cultures

Moon Shadow's Dilemma in Laurence Yep's Dragonwings

Laurence Yep writes in his autobiography that he was an avid reader and a good student. He quickly discovered his local library and eventually the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library where he searched out aliens in the adult science fiction collection. He states that as a child, stories about boys with bicycles who live where no one locks their doors seemed like fantasy to him.

Ironically, what seemed truer to him were science fiction and fantasy. In these books children were taken to other lands where they had to learn strange customs and adjust to new people. He explains, "They dealt with the real mysteries of life--like finding yourself and your place in the world. And that was something I did every time I got on and off the bus" (Yep, Garden, p. 77).

Given this perspective, it is no surprise that Laurence Yep's first novel Sweetwater is a complex science fiction tale. It tells of two rival human factions with different lifestyles that co-inhabit an already inhabited alien planet named Harmony which they colonize to support the planet Earth. The main character, Tyree Priest, lives a life of adventure and reflection while crossing racial and social barriers among the three cultures. Through his secret mentor, Tyree gains an appreciation for music, and he struggles with his community against not only human adversaries but against the forces of nature. As he grows into a mature young man, he discovers the meaning of family. In simplest terms, Sweetwater is a story that attempts to establish true harmony on Harmony. The handling of its themes leads Laurence Yep next to write

Dragonwings and in so doing, to confront the reality of his own bicultural identity.

Yep published Dragonwings in 1975. The book won the Newbery Award in 1976. In 1995, it won the Children's Literature Association's Phoenix Award which is presented to a work published twenty years earlier that has lasting value and resonance across time and readerships. Its story is the story of a young boy named Moon Shadow and his physical and emotional journeys between Chinese and American cultures.

Establishing Reader Empathy

At the start of Dragonwings, eight-year-old Moon Shadow is in China and wants to know about the Land of the Golden Mountain where his father crossed the ocean to work. His mother is reluctant to talk about the land of the demons which has much money with much danger. When Moon Shadow badgers his grandmother for information, she reminds him that his own grandfather was hanged almost the moment he reached shores of the Land of the Golden Mountain. In this way, before Moon Shadow even leaves for America, he begins his journey with stories, the terrible stories he hears about the Land of the Golden Mountain and its temptations and its dangers. As readers, we learn through his ears and we hear what Moon Shadow hears.

When Moon Shadow is nine years old, his cousin comes from America to bring Moon Shadow back to America with him. His uncles' laundry needs him to work. Moon Shadow's mother and grandmother protest but Moon Shadow says he wants to go and to be with his father. During the sea voyage, the passengers, including the cousin

who escorts Moon Shadow, tell more and more stories about the demons. Moon Shadow is terrified. Now, in addition to stories about the demons, he actually sees the tall, hairy demons who work as sailors on the ship. We learn through Moon Shadow's eyes and we see what Moon Shadow sees.

Upon arrival in America, custom officials keep Moon Shadow and his cousin in a long, two-story warehouse for two weeks while they wait their turn for an interview. At last the officials question Moon Shadow about his village and kinsmen and try hard to make him prove that he is not his father's son. The officials do not succeed, and Moon Shadow moves on to the next step. He must strip naked for a physical. The officials take all his measurements so no one else can sneak in to America as his father's son. Finally, he and his cousin stand at the open doorway leading out of the warehouse. There is no Golden Mountain to greet them. Moon Shadow is confused and disappointed. We learn through Moon Shadow's experiences and we feel what Moon Shadow feels.

Thus, through Moon Shadow's ears, eyes, and experiences, we understand how we as non-Chinese are perceived when we are the unknown entity. On the one hand, since we are the demons, we are united in our demonhood. On the other hand, simultaneously, we identify with Moon Shadow because, as human beings, we have also faced unfamiliar, frightening situations. Moreover, in this nation of immigrants, most of us are immigrants or have connections to voluntary or forced immigration. Thus, by page 12 of Dragonwings, Laurence Yep firmly establishes our empathy with Moon Shadow on three levels: (1) the perception of Americans from a child's point of

view, (2) our common human experience of confronting new situations, and (3) our common history of immigration.

Maintaining Reader Empathy

However, no author can maintain empathy if the demons are constantly bad and the Chinese constantly good. Laurence Yep maintains a balance with Moon Shadow's experiences in both cultures.

For example, as the ship nears California, when Moon Shadow observes that the land of the demons is "a brown smudge on the horizon" (p. 11), he remembers that the Middle Kingdom, his homeland, looked the same from a distance as the boat was leaving.

The older women in his life, his mother and the demoness, Miss Whitlaw, voice similar perspectives on meeting new people as people first. His father reminds him, "Your mother was always polite to everyone" (DW, p. 100), and Moon Shadow later observes, "Another thing to say for the demoness was her genuine interest in learning about people as people" (DW, p. 116).

Later the demon girl, Mrs. Whitlaw's niece, visits Moon Shadow. She looks at their books and questions Moon Shadow about his knowledge of dragons. She demands to see their books about dragons, and Moon Shadow tells her that he and his father know the stories about dragons because they grew up hearing them as part of their lives. They do not come from books but the stories are true. She responds, "In China?" and Moon Shadow, upset, declares, "In whole world. You 'Mericans not know everything." The demon girl responds grudgingly, "But then, you don't know everything

either" (DW, p. 125). They continue to talk about reading and books. By the end of the evening, Moon Shadow finally calls the demon girl by her name, Robin. This episode marks Moon Shadow's emotional entrance into his second culture.

Yep continues his theme of shared books and shared stories as a meeting ground between disparate peoples. Now Moon Shadow begins to visit Miss Whitlaw every evening to read with Robin, and Miss Whitlaw encourages him to write short paragraphs about dragons whose English she and Robin correct. Moon Shadow becomes proficient enough in writing to establish a correspondence with Wilbur and Orville Wright for his father, an expert kite maker interested in aircraft. While Moon Shadow sets out to reeducate the demoness about the varied personalities of dragons, Miss Whitlaw educates him in the demonic language. They learn from each other in fair exchange.

The relationship between Moon Shadow and Miss Whitlaw and Moon Shadow's mastery of English cement Moon Shadow's ability to function in his new culture. Prior to the evening visits at Miss Whitlaw's, Moon Shadow experiences both bad demons and bad Chinese. He lives with his father and uncles in Chinatown and makes only occasional trips outside the ghetto. When granduncle's opium-addicted son nearly kills Moon Shadow and his father takes revenge, the two of them must leave the laundry, the brotherhood, and Chinatown. Moon Shadow's father makes the decision to physically enter the demon world when he remembers a demon man whose car he repaired and contacts him for work. The demon man sets him up with jobs repairing small machines and with housing in Miss Whitlaw's garage. This arrangement puts

Moon Shadow and his father, Windrider, physically in the demon culture. However, it is the closeness that develops with Miss Whitlaw and Robin and Moon Shadow's developing ability in English which forge his emotional bridge to his second culture.

The San Francisco Earthquake serves as a second physical catalyst to separate Moon Shadow and his father from Chinatown. This time, however, they separate from the demon community as well. Windrider decides that the chaos from the Earthquake has loosened their connections to not only the land but also its communities. The time has come to pursue his dream of making a flying machine. He rents a barn on a hilltop and he and Moon Shadow eke out a bare existence separate from most humanity, putting everything they earn into the needed supplies to build an aircraft. Moon Shadow supports his father's dream. As their relationship deepens, we enter their undertaking along with them. Because humanity has for centuries dreamed of human flight, it is a dream that is easy to share.

But, in addition to empathy, our session also concerns child labor. Yes, Moon Shadow works hard in the laundry. Do we not feel compassion for him? Perhaps his own words console us too well. Early in Dragonwings he tells us:

> ...I learned that the Company was more than a group of men wanting money. We were brothers: strangers in a strange land who had banded together for mutual help and protection....I was treated as a man and not a boy; and the long hours I worked were really no worse than the hours I had worked on our farm. In the mornings I was the first to get up and make the fire and brew the tea for the others....I worked sixteen

hours a day and had never been happier in my life (pp. 49-50).

Later when Moon Shadow and Windrider are living in the hilltop barn working on the aircraft, we see through the eyes of other characters that he is malnourished. His clothes are worn and patched, and the barn where he and Windrider live never loses the odor of animal manure. Through other people's observations of Moon Shadow, we realize the extent of his physical sacrifice to his father's dream. In his own words, Moon Shadow talks only about the steps in putting together the aircraft. About his living conditions and physical sacrifices, we rarely have a clue. All of us, characters and readers, have been lost in the world of imagination. Windrider's dream feeds our souls. We understand how to sacrifice everything that can make daily life comfortable to a shared dream that may or may not come alive. This is Cervantes' Don Quixote building an aircraft to the accompaniment of Broadway's "To Dream the Impossible Dream". At this moment and with this realization of Moon Shadow and Windrider's large and small sacrifices to an idea, Laurence Yep brings his readers to the pinnacle of compassionate imagining. We are one with the characters.

Writing to Cope

Laurence Yep's imagining rings even more true when we become aware of the life contexts for Dragonwings. Yep's father was born in China in 1914 and joined his father in America when he was 10 years old. They flew kites together. Yep writes in his Afterword that Dragonwings is "a historical fantasy" inspired by both his father's journey to America and the newspaper account of a young Chinese flier Fung Joe Guey who flew for twenty minutes in the hills of Oakland, California on September 22,

1909. He had improved not only upon the Wright Brothers' original design but he had also made his own wireless sets and telephones.

After six years' research, Yep was able to uncover little about the human experience of Chinese immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century. He did learn that from the 1850's to the 1930's males from economically distressed areas of southern China came to work in the United States and earned money to send back to their impoverished families. While they worked in America, they formed a bachelor society. In later years, the American government allowed wives to join husbands and raise families in the United States. While the Chinese strove to adapt to American customs, many such as Yep's own family, lost touch with the rich cultural traditions of their homeland and the history of the bachelor society. For a third generation Chinese-American like Yep, an understanding of his ancestors' experiences required not only extensive research but also a powerful imagination.

Yep grew up outside of Chinatown in an apartment above his parents' grocery store in a largely African-American neighborhood. His immediate family did not speak Chinese. When he went to St. Mary's Elementary School which had been transformed into a Chinese school, he resented his placement in the dummies class to learn Chinese. In the neighborhood, he quickly became the all-purpose Asian, functioning as Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, in teasing or in games. The anecdotes from his autobiography The Lost Garden demonstrate clearly how complicated it is for children to work though the issues involved in ethnic and personal identity.

Laurence Yep is willing to confront what he calls his Chineseness through his

books. He states that his writing has helped him negotiate his personal journey.

> I was the Chinese American raised in a black neighborhood, a child who had been too American to fit into Chinatown and too Chinese to fit in elsewhere. I was the clumsy son of the athletic family, the grandson of a Chinese grandmother who spoke more of West Virginia than of China. When I wrote, I went from being a puzzle to a puzzle solver (Yep, Garden, p. 91).

About Yep's writing, author and critic Maxine Hong Kingston supports the importance of children's reading his work when she states, "There are scenes...that will make every Chinese-American child gasp with recognition. 'Hey! That happened to me. I did that. I say that,' ..., and be glad that a writer set it down, and feel comforted, less eccentric, less alone " (1977, p. E1). Beyond Yep's relevance to a Chinese-American audience, his work reflects a common humanity to readers coming of age or not, bicultural or not, attempting to find the pieces of their particular puzzles in order to find themselves.

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